Why Generation(s) Matter(s) to Policy

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ABSTRACT

Generation is a packed social concept, with immense explanatory capacity and policy utility, yet it is a concept fraught with misunderstanding in both the social sciences and in popular usage. It is no less fraught in policy. This short overview paper has three objectives:

- 1) to explore generation as a socially useful explanatory concept and distinguish it from its close cousins, cohort and age group;
- 2) to show how generation has been thought about theoretically and historically in ways that are useful today;
- 3) to contemplate why policy should be interested in generation(s) in 2007 and beyond.

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Generation as a concept

An enduring puzzle in the social sciences, perhaps the most enduring, is explaining change over time. Multiple registers of change over time must be considered simultaneously: Change in individual lives, developmentally as well as socially; Changes in the lives of those closest to us, families and close friends; Changes in social and economic contexts of work, making a living, and mobility (both geographic and social); Changes in policy regimes that provide more or less security against risks: and Macro-changes, of history as it unfolds.

Generation is a concept that connects individuals and their capacities to act and make decisions (what sociologists call 'agency'), with social structures that are themselves not stationary. These connections are made through social time, or the means and processes by which social change is managed and individuals traverse time through transitions

(school, work, family, migration, job exit, retraining, re-entry to work, retirement, etc.). They carry with them through social time and transitions various advantages and disadvantages which accumulate through lives.

Generation in the social sciences is used in at least three ways. First, it is seen as equivalent to birth cohort. Popular usage sees generation and cohort as synonyms, conflating two different concepts. The very popular discourse on Boomers, Xers, etc. takes generation to mean birth cohort. Some social science uses the terms interchangeably as well.

Second, generation is seen as a family term, denoting age-based locations in families. This derives from the anthropological approach to generation as age-graded locations in families and society that form social systems (Eisenstadt, 1956, discusses this approach at length). Implied in this 'take' on generation is a social relation among those of different ages. Generation, in this sense then, has a fluidity and dynamism that it does not have when it is equated with birth cohort. For example, one is not born a grandfather with a set of inbuilt social relations to others but the role of grandfather is something constantly changing as individuals move into and out of the role. Birth cohorts, by contrast, never change, unless one lies about one's age!

Third, generations can be seen as time-specific social locations similar to class locations that may give rise to a similar sense of group consciousness or group conflict. This is the sense in which Mannheim (1928/ 1952) theorized generation. He was highly critical of those who saw generation as simply chronological age or biological fact. He saw the sociological phenomenon of generations as based on biological rhythms of birth and death, but more than that, "Were it not for the existence of social interaction between

human beings – were there no definable social structure, no history based on a particular sort of community, then generation would not exist as a social location phenomenon" (Mannheim, 1928/1952:290-291).

Generation, in the Mannheim approach, is a unique kind of social location, premised on a dynamic interplay of birth time and the socio-political events occurring at crucial life course moments for that birth cohort. The importance of generation in this view, is not the year of birth or the size of the birth cohort, but the social relevance of being born at a particular historical time in a given society. So, if a person was born in England in 1920, their lives would have been substantially influenced by World War II, not because of when they were born *per se* but because they hit key ages when WWII needed people of their age. Turner (2002) elaborates how generational consciousness forms around the intersections of particular ages and historical events. A key example in North American society is those who were in their youth when the Sixties arrived. A clear interaction is apparent, but not determined, by a youth cohort intersecting with a historically changing socio-cultural movement.

Generation, it has been subsequently argued (see McDaniel (1997a; 1997b, 2002; 2004), can be many things: a social organizational construct, a basis for stratification, a lens, an identity, a social movement, the basis of social action or in-action, an iconography, an element of claims-making/entitlement, a social relation, and/or a basis for social continuity. It has also been argued (McDaniel, 2004) that generation is a process in a similar way to gender as process, where generation is done by performance, in social relation to others. In this sense, generation is, like other social processes,

contingent, linked to social structures such as gender, ethnicity, class, inequality systems, linked to other social processes, and something done rather than something born into. This opens a barn door of possibilities for utilizing generation as a social policy concept, another means by which social inequalities can be understood and ameliorated.

Generation in theory and history

The study of generation, and particularly of generational relations, has been largely oriented to the present, and thus clouded by myths about the past. A historical perspective enables the illumination of change contexts over time and ways in which social changes have affected the life experiences of those born at different times (a Mannheim perspective). Myths about the past abound, but perhaps are nowhere more prevalent than the image of the idealized three-generation families of yesteryear. Myths are stronger than realities, and the image of the co-resident, caring three-generation family of the past dies hard. These rarely, if ever, existed. People's life expectancies were so low that it was virtually impossible to live in a three-generation family for most of society. Most families were nuclear in the past, not out of choice necessarily, but out of survival. When older parents co-resided with adult children, it was less out of preference than out of need (Haraven, 1994). They essentially 'huddled together' for insurance and warmth. Many households had non-family co-residing – for those less well-off, the taking in of boarders was common; for those better off, servants formed part of the household.

Historical changes in the timing of life events has changed generations. Declining mortality in North America, for example, since the 19th century, has resulted in a greater uniformity of life courses for many, but not all. But the timing of major life events –

entry into parenthood, completion of childbearing, experiencing of the 'empty nest', retirement, widowhood, death – have all changed drastically. A life looks profoundly different if a woman's life is spent largely in childbearing and childrearing with a life expectancy that does not extend much beyond the 'empty nest,' if in fact, the woman lives that long, than for a woman who has two children in her early thirties and lives until 83. More flexible patterns occur in life and many more are possible.

Theorizing generation is not fully possible without some theorization of life course and of social relations in families, labour markets and in the public sphere. The life course paradigm focuses on how lives are longitudinal, multi-faceted, linked, and unfold in socio-political contexts. Transitions in life are key to understanding how lives are constructed in terms of opportunity networks and synchronization of individual lives with collective expectations in various realms. Generational expectations are shaped by the values and experiences that evolve and modify over time. These expectations can transcend or eclipse age and cohort. Generational consciousness is based on shared history and that is seldom limited by age or birth timing, although historical events can differently impact people of different ages.

Why Generation matters to policy

Generation is a social construct related to inequality that has not had much policy attention. In part, this may be because it is more elusive than birth cohort, ethnicity, gender or even class. Yet, it is a social construct that is fundamentally important in shaping and forming our expectations about relationships with others both older and younger, our senses of entitlement with respect to life course sacrifices and contributions,

and our views of social responsibilities. It is much more than accounting amongst cohorts of who gets more benefits in relation to who pays in to various schemes or programs.

Generation as essentially a relational concept, opens policy to exploring who does what in relation to whom. For whom were sacrifices made by soldiers as well as workers and family members on the home front during World Wars I and II, as well as in today's conflicts in Afghanistan? Using this example reveals the power of generation as a policy tool. Clearly, those sacrificing are not only benefiting their families and workmates, or only those in particular cohorts. The contributions are greater. Entire generations of military personnel from young armed forces members to cooks, officers and generals develop a generational consciousness based on the war experience. We have a clear sense, at least each November on Remembrance Day of gratitude. It is partially structured by age, as Mannheim suggests, but not fully.

The sense of generationing, the process by which groups form bonds, a sense of shared experience which can morph into entitlement or its opposite, is not something to which policy has given much thought. Yet, it may be this process of generationing, more than age-markers on their own, that provide a sense of contribution and entitlement in, for example, the expected transition into retirement at a particular or approximate age. The same could be said about young adults in launching themselves (or not) from the family home.

Policy, in opening to the possibilities generation and generationing offers for building policies in new ways, might move more in the direction of deep understanding of what kinds of nurturing and sustaining social relations citizens wish to have with each other,

with others in society with whom they have bonds across time but no personal connections except through generation within nation, and across social time in perpetuity.

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